DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 218 TM 027 406

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TITLE Can Reflection Be Confined into Roles? First and Second Order Research in Action Research.
SPONS AGENCY Commission of the European Communities, Brussels (Belgium).
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; Administrator Role; *Educational Research; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Principals; *Research Methodology; *Researchers; Teacher Researchers
IDENTIFIERS Italy; *Reflection Process; *Researcher Role

ABSTRACT

The distinction between first-order and second-order research in action research is explored in the context of work on the Management for Organizational and Human Development (MOHD) project in Italy. Researchers worked with two groups of heads of primary schools in Italy to develop a path of reflection and research on their roles and functions and strategies to achieve cooperative management of their schools. Educational research in Italy is largely in the hands of academics, and teachers are generally not invited to participate. The distinction that is usually made between first-order inquiry by teachers and second-order research by central evaluators might be a helpful distinction in the Italian context in helping clarify the responsibilities of various participants, but experience with the MOHD project shows that it is difficult to separate the two types of research and assign them to practitioners and researchers respectively. When teacher/researchers reflect on the best strategies to develop teachers' reflective capacities, they are themselves practitioners carrying out first-order reflection on their practice. In the MOHD project, practitioners and research facilitators learned from each other in terms of reciprocal monitoring. Considering the MOHD research process results in the conclusion that the timing and use of strategies for cooperative management were the subject of first-order reflection, and could not easily be separated from second-order inquiry. The nature of the roles of heads of schools meant that they participated easily as practitioners and researchers. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Can reflection be confined into roles?

First and second order research in action research.

Bruno Losito, Graziella Pozzo, Bridget Somekh

1. Premise

In this paper we would like to present in a way that is tentative and not final a few reflections about the distinction between first- and second-order research in action research. We stress the 'tentative and not final' aspect since our reflection is still on the way. But also because it seems to us that the way reflection was carried out in the action research project we refer to in this paper, is strictly dependent on the specific context in which the project itself took place - the context of the Italian system of education - and on the different cultures that are present in this country.

The reflection springs from our work as 'facilitators/outside researchers' within the Management for Organisational and Human Development (MOHD) project[1]. Through the action research methodology, the objective of the project was to develop:

> "* generation of knowledge and explanatory theories relating to the processes of whole organisation development;
> * improvement of the effectiveness and efficiency of the participating organisations in fulfilment of their organisational mission, and of the educational processes which enable that improvement through the creation of a 'learning organisation' ".[2]

In this context, we worked with two groups of primary school heads (one in Turin and the other in Rome) developing a path of reflection and research on their role and functions, together with the strategies to achieve what they themselves called a 'cooperative management' of their schools [3].

We shall present our reflection in discourse form, using passages taken from the transcriptions of the recorded discussions of the two groups of schoolheads, from their written reflections, facilitators' diaries (that were often shared in a distance communication/discussion process)[4].

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[1] The project was in part funded by the European Commission - DG XII, and saw the participation of six European research centres: Scottish Council for Research in Education (Edinburgh); Centro Europeo dell'Educazione (Frascati - Roma); University of Malaga - Departamento de Didactitca y Organizacion Escolar - Facultad de Ciencias de la Educacion; University of Innsbruck - Department of Business Education and Personnel Management; University of Klagenfurt - Institut für Schulpädagogik; University of East Anglia - Centre for Applied Research in Education. The international coordinator was Bridget Somekh from SCRE.

[2] See *Management for Organisational and Human Development*, the proposal presented to the Commission of the European Community, DG XII.

[3] See Bucci C., B. Ciaffi, E. Golzio, G. La Rosa, B. Losito, L. Patriarca, G. Pozzo, R. Puleo, R. Rossi, D. Rossin, S. Salacone, C. Truccano, S. Valentini, *The 'cooperative management' of a learning community: the role of the heads in school development, a* paper presented at the MOHD final conference, CEDE, Frascati, September 1996

[4] The two groups met separately once a month from September 1995 to December 1996. In the second half of May 1996 the two groups met during a three-day seminar. In the seminar a comparison was made on processes, issues that emerged and proposals for developing the project. During the year the groups regularly exchanged minutes of meetings, transcriptions of discussions and materials produced. The two outside researchers/facilitators acted as

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2. The distinction between 'first' and 'second' order research: a starting point for reflection

Our reflection on the distinction between 'first' and 'second' order research in action research started to develop from our practical experience as researchers/facilitators and was stimulated by the way this distinction has been repeatedly formulated by action researchers, particularly by John Elliott. In Action research for educational change (Elliott 1991, pp.26-27), John Elliott says:

> "The attempt of the Humanities project team to facilitate reflective practice in schools generated an important conceptual distinction between the 'research' role of the outsider in relation to the 'research' role of the insider practitioner (see Elliott 1976-77). Stenhouse contrasted the first order inquiry of the teachers with the second order inquiry of the central team. The teachers' inquiry was focused on the problems of developing pedagogical strategies consistent with educational aims and principles. The team's inquiry was focused on the problems of facilitating teachers' reflective capacities".

In the same book John Elliott talks of a

> "second order process of action research....i.e. a process of reflectively analysing his experience as an action-research facilitator" (p.13).

We have quoted these passages because we feel they provide some important elements on which to reflect.
In the first quotation, there is a clear intention to distinguish between the various research 'objects'. For teachers, their research 'object' is their own teaching practice (first order inquiry), for outside researchers ("academics", "teacher educators") it is the strategies for facilitating the development of "teachers' reflective capacities" (second order inquiry).
This distinction may seem to pose a problem of ownership, as research primarly belongs to the practitioners. It is up to the practitioner to establish educational objectives and strategies to achieve them. These objectives cannot be defined from the outside and the contribution of the outside researcher/facilitator can only be one of support and facilitation in the process of reflection. However, this seems to be less of a problem in such contexts where the contents (or parts of the content) of the research are aspects of methodology. In this case the object of research may be of equal concern and have the same relevance for both figures, practitioners and outside researcher/facilitator, as it has been the case for us with the MOHD project, where an important aspect of content of the research was the use of facilitatory strategies in complex and dilemmatic situations. Was this overlapping of objectives the result of the special features of our context of work, or can this also be true in other contexts?
This distinction is particularly important in the education context, in a teacher training context and - more generally - in educational research in Italy.

The Italian context

Before dealing with the problematic aspects of first- and second-order research, let's turn to the features of the Italian context. First, in Italy there is no systematic initial training, nor in-service training. Let alone 'courses' for teachers on action research run by Universities. The dominant culture in education is still geared to a top down approach and teacher research is, in general, neither facilitated nor supported. It is true that in spite of a generally deprived context things are changing

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mediators for 'distance communication' between the two groups. They themselves carried out distance reflection on their own facilitation and research work.
At present, the two groups of primary school heads are trying to find ways to continue the research they started, notwithstanding the end of the MOHD project.

rapidly and different form of innovation are on the way, among which a major one regarding school autonomy, both administrative and in curriculum design. But the initiatives that use the methodology of action research either for teacher development or for educational research are few and, again, not systematic.
In such a context the dominant culture is a hindrance towards practices that ask for the explicitation of beliefs and tacit assumptions and the reflection on alternative ways of teaching, as well as such practices as classroom observation, the use of feedback and the implementation of facilitatory techniques. In Italy accountability is not yet an issue. The classroom is still a secluded place, not open to external eyes and professional isolation is still a dominant feature, both for the teacher and for the head of school. Likewise, research 'on the field' is practised on a very small scale and it is difficult to find arenas where practitioners can reflect together on their profession, as well as journal interested in hosting reflective experiences on school practices coming from the school[5].
Educational research is still strongly in the hands of the Academia and if, or when, teachers are invited to take part in a research project, their position is not symmetrical, the aim of the research being completely out of their hands. They stand a lower, subsidiary level and their role goes from the administration of tests or questionnaires to students to the implementation of techniques or new ways of teaching that have been generated elsewhere[6].

Within such a context, distinguishing between first and second order research may contribute to clear up the different place and responsibility of practitioners and of outside researchers and to safeguard/support autonomy of the former as regards the latter.
However the distinction between first and second order research can be useful to refer to the different roles that practitioners and outside researchers/facilitators have in an action research process and in their different institutional place.

But, on further reflection, there is perhaps something misleading in the use of the word 'second'. Second to what? By exploring the term 'second' we discovered that it may resonate in ways that are different or even in contrast, as it may point to any of the following:
* 'secondary' as opposed to 'primary' = 'less important'
* 'secondary', that belongs to a higher level = hierarchically superior (= more important?)
* 'secondary' as lower, that belongs to a hierarchically inferior level (= less important), but also that belongs to a deeper level = metalevel?

If we leave nominalistic argumentation and go to the core of the matter, the question could be rephrased in terms of:
- what is second order research about (that is, the theoretical knowledge derived from the research itself): content? process? methodology?
- through which processes is reflection of this kind developed?
- who owns this type of knowledge? the outside researcher/facilitator? the teacher/practitioner ? or both?

[5] But may be the problem here is more complex, as the oral tradition in learning at all levels, from primary school to University, where exams are mostly oral, is responsible for the lack of familiarity with the written medium which again is mainly in the hands of people working at the University

[6] This explains why the term 'action research' is all too often used in Italy today to mean any project (of research and/or innovation) that in some way involves teachers, or even for research projects that do not meet the 'scientific' criteria established by the academic world. This distorted use of the term is certainly a hindrance to the spreading of action research both in universities and schools.

Metamorphoses as metaphors for metaprocesses

If we consider the latter group of questions, what we see as firm ground is that not all knowledge produced in the same context is of the same interest to different practitioners (teacher practitioner and researcher practitioner). Conversely, all practitioners can be involved in the production of knowledge and in the control of the processes leading to the production of knowledge (meta-processes). The reasons why this type of knowledge seems to be more in the hands of the outside researcher rather than in the hands of the teacher practitioner may be of a professional as well as evolutionary order, that is, due to professional profile, type of experience and access to previously established knowledge.

Reflecting, however, on our own experience in the MOHD project (and on other action research projects we have taken part in) we find it difficult to clearly attribute first and second order research - as they are usually presented - to the different figures (practitioner and researcher/facilitator) involved in action research.
It is as if we were lost in a maze. In a maze the person inside does not know whether what lies in front of him is figure or background, much in the same way as when you are in front of a picture by Escher. Escher's pictures can be taken as good metaphors to illustrate the point: what is figure and what is background in Sky and Water 1 or in Metamorphoses, for example? It is impossible to say. The background becomes the figure when you switch the channel of your perception from figure to background. Moreover, in his painting, Escher manages to hold together paired opposites such as "light-dark, flat-rounded, figure-background, interlocking pictorial elements-independent pictorial elements, geometric structure-realistic form" (Locher 1988). Action research sets in motion both processes and reflection on processes, propositional knowledge and procedural knowledge. In action research what is at work is both explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958); in action research the people involved at all these levels are both the practitioners and the outside researcher.
Escher's metaphor is adequate: with its recurrent images it reflects the mirror-quality of the answer to the question 'whose concern is second-order research?', with its recurrent images. The metaphor becomes inadequate when we consider roles: the role of the outside researcher/facilitator is not the same as the practitioner; just like in the picture, birds remain birds and fish remain fish.

Outside researchers and facilitators are themselves 'practitioners'

John Elliott writes (Elliott 1993, p.177):

> "If educational theorists subscribe to this account of reflective teaching, then to be consistent they should also argue that theorising about the nature of action-research cannot be separated from reflecting about strategies for facilitating this kind of professional learning. In other words, as a conceptualisation of professional learning, action-research theory should be developed in conjunction with attempts to develop strategies for facilitating action-research among teachers. This implies that the context for developing action-research theory is in itself a form of second-order action-research.
> In my view, academics who teach and write about action-research theory should see themselves as under an obligation to undertake a second-order action-research into their own teacher education practices. Submission to such a discipline is essential if academics are to avoid perpetrating ideas which misrepresent and distort action-research in order to legitimate the hegemony of academics in their relations to teachers".

In fact we believe that when researchers/teacher educators reflect on the best strategies to develop teachers reflective capacities, they are themselves practitioners carrying out first order reflection on their practice. In this light, John Elliott's call for an obligation for researchers/facilitators to

personally develop action research is completely legitimate and indeed fundamental.
When they 'theorise' on action research as a strategy for training, research and change, they move to a different level of reflection, further removed from reflection on one's own practice.
The two kinds of reflection are strongly interconnected, the latter necessarily being (or should be) based on the former.
Likewise, when a practitioner reflects on his/her development within an action research project and on the strategies being used to reflect on practice s/he is developing a reflection of 'second' order.
How and where this type of reflection is developed? Under what conditions does it thrive? Can context have an influence in helping such reflection? What is the function of this type of reflection in action research projects where the focus is on learning and change and where the research is in the hand of the practitioner?

3. MOHD: context and the conditions under which it developed

Sketching a profile of Italian schoolheads may help to see the multifaceted role they have, as was amply noted during the MOHD project (Bucci et al, 1996): their professional life is marked by low-level chores such as the daily practical tasks that allow for the smooth running of the school as well as by administrative tasks and responsibility for educational matters and staff management. In some way, the role of schoolheads is one of 'interface' between the various internal elements of the school (teachers, pupils, administrative staff) and between the school and the outside world (parents, local education departments, local authorities, the neighbourhood). In order to carry out this interface role, schoolheads find themselves having to act as mediators in their work with others (individuals and groups) both inside and outside the school domain.
This calls upon communicative skills and process facilitation skills (such as the handling of conflict) which in some way brings the expertise of the schoolhead closer to that of facilitator.

Two groups of heads of school were formed, one in Turin and one in Rome. The basic principle followed in forming the two groups was that of co-optation. The participants knew each other well, shared a common attitude of 'commitment' towards school and were vaguely interested in the methodology of action research, although none of them, except one, had had previous experiences in the field.
All participants entered the project on a voluntary basis. As a matter of fact, although the project was presented and illustrated to the local school authorities, no official recognition was obtained, in spite of an openly declared interest for an experience considered as innovative for heads of school in-service training.
A third aspect that is important to stress is that of the limited number of the group members (five school heads in Rome, six in Turin).
The project developed as a series of meeting where the heads of school at the presence of a facilitator would discuss the problems as they arose in their professional practice.
Reflection developed within a group and was the result of a collective discussion in which the differing points of view of each person were freely expressed, contrasted and valorised. In some way the group became **a safe place - a space for reflection**.
In this regard, the Turin group of schoolheads wrote the following:

> "Reflecting within the group on documented action is important both for those who physically carry out action research and also for other group members. In-group discussion of collected data improves the possibility of a solution to the problem, activates sensors, helps find connections and the sense of one's own interpretative path".

A schoolhead from Rome went on:

> "What do we mean by saying that the group is a 'safe place'? Firstly, that it is the chosen place for moments of reassurance (when you have an urgent problem that must be solved), in which to feel at ease (against the stresses and strains of everyday life), to find help/support (to better understand the problems at hand). But the group is also a place in which to compare various views, another possible way - or many other ways - of doing things".

Compared to the isolation, the fast pace, the many tasks that schoolheads have in their daily work[7], the group was an opportunity to come out from isolation, to meet other views, to present one's professional practice and related problems for collective discussion, and thus to 'break off from it in some way'. It was probably this chance to detach oneself from daily *affairs* and of *contrasting views* that played a fundamental role in developing reflection.
Reflecting with others and reasoning together allowed a sort of 'critical detachment' from one's own experience and the chance to rethink it in a more articulate and less self-referential way, making explicit those elements that in an individual dimension risk remaining implicit. From this standpoint, the group carried out the function of 'collective critical friend', both for those who presented their own experience to the group and for those who then discussed the experiences.

Timing was also important. For schoolheads, the MOHD project was a collective moment in which individual reflection times were respected: "the development of reflection and the growth of awareness", as one Roman schoolhead wrote, "have very personal times, generally long and not pre-established". These times depend on one's training, professional experience and cognitive styles.
Moreover, schoolheads as well as teachers do not seem to have engrained time for reflection in their profession. The MOHD project also meant this for them.
Naturally, the amount of time does not in itself guarantee the quality of reflection and other conditions are needed. Above all, at the start of the reflection path, it is important to have a situation of security and mutual trust. This trust is important to facilitate paths of change that action research gives rise to, also involving the personal sphere (or at least the willingness to change of this sort).
As facilitators, we tried to contribute to constructing this climate within the group through a contract that was negotiated by all the members of the two groups, was shared by all the participants and to which the groups returned during the research (Losito-Pozzo, 1997).
During this negotiation we tried to make explicit the various motivations and expectations of each participant. We limited ourselves to collecting the relative data and to guaranteeing that the use of the data was protected. We jointly defined the common 'rules of the game'. Among these 'rules' there was one relative to structuring the common tasks around which to organise the discussion and construction of a **collective memory**. The recordings made of the meetings and their transcriptions, the minutes, notes, written work materials circulated within the groups (and between the two groups) all represented moments which went to make up the collective memory. A memory that was difficult to 'share' with the outside, but essential for reflection within the two groups. In fact the transcriptions have been proved to work not only as scaffolding for memory; they have also provided us with a precious corpus of data in which we can mirror ourselves to see the evolution of concepts in time, as well as to trace back the changes in thinking and in patterns of behaviour, in the discourse

[7] In Italian schools, schoolheads work in relative isolation. If compared with teachers and other professional figures working inside schools, schoolheads are 'unique' figures, placed as they are in a position that is isolated within the school hierarchy, and on whom responsibilities, requests, contradictions and conflicts are heaped. The words that the schoolheads who took part in the MOHD project used to describe their difficult situation were: 'fatigue', 'anxiety', 'overload', 'uncertainty'. It is not surprising that the metaphors used by the heads to describe their position inside school stress this aspect of isolation and loneliness: a cage, a shipwreck survivor landed on an island in a sea of burning oil, a balloon inflated in a house, a lone voice in the desert, being tied to a railway track with an oncoming train, the sink)

as well as in action.
It was from these materials (indeed, using these materials as 'data') that the schoolheads critically rethought the path achieved, giving rise to what we feel was a reflection of the second order in every respect (cfr. Bucci et al., 1996). Written materials were fundamental in this process, both in the documentation stage and also in reflection of the first and second order (in reflecting upon heads' professional practice through examples they presented in the group discussion and upon the process of reflection they were engaged in).

As for the nature of the discussions and what has been produced in terms of quantity and quality in the groups, this is how Graziella describes what she sees happening in the MOHD sessions, in her correspondence to Bruno:

"If I put myself in the shoes of an ethnomethodologist, observe and mirror what comes out of all the sessions (and we can do this easily using the hundreds of pages with the transcription of the recordings) I can see what the group has produced in terms of quantity and quality.

About quantity, what we have produced is hours (and pages) of unplanned discourse. What is it that falls on the table around which the meetings take place? Lots of stories and incidents that are the stuff the life of a head of school is made of. A lot of rubbish, then? In the words of the practitioners, pouring out problems, incidents and dilemmas is important in a profession where people work mostly in isolation as it allows to unburden a lot of emotional tension and this has a heartening effect.

Once they are articulated, problems, dilemmas, incidents and conflicts are not left in the air, so to speak, but handled critically, deconstructed. And maybe this has to do with the quality of the critical dialogue that has developed in the group. At least, this seems to go in the direction pointed by Somekh when she suggests that a way of validating theory comes from examining one's own practice and by 'looking at whether or not changes which you based upon those theories have led to some improvement'. Changes can occur and be sought in very fine aspects of daily practice, they can be about 'small points', 'but quite often it is a lot of these small points together that are important in developing theories that have power in bringing about change'.[8]

Deconstruction requires a series of acts that have proved important for the development of the group, as the reflection on the techniques used in the group appears now and again on the surface of the discourse.

For a person articulating the problem or delivering the case, what is needed is:

- a careful description of the fact or conflict, a clear formulation of the problem, a staging of the dilemma
- the attention be paid to the small details concerning the interaction: the real words uttered, the nature of the questions, the tone of the voice, the posture...

The listener's task (initially modelled by the facilitator) is to try and help the recollection of facts and details from long-term memory and their foregrounding, so as to make them available to critical inspection. He/she can do this by means of:

- indirect utterances that will not interfere with the effort itself of the recollection such as the use of paraphrase
- probing questions (when an important detail is needed or when a gap is perceived between two pieces of information)
- a non-judgemental (that is, denotative) language when unravelling the information received"

The transcriptions contain a lot of judgemental words and suggestions appear frequently on the surface of the discourse, but the tension of the groups has been (and still is) towards a type of communication that will facilitate recollection and produce a dialogue that is critical and warm-and-friendly at the same time, and the tension is sustained by the awareness that this type of communication is even more crucial when we turn our attention from the development of the individual to the vision of the learning organisation. We are in a process and we know that we still have to work a lot in this direction, but we know where we want to get and this gives the practitioners as well as the facilitators a common goal in the research.
As a methodological notation on the way we worked, the transcription of our free discussions turned to be a precious source of data, a source of data which remained available for later inspection and that was in fact used intensely by some of the practitioners who would read the transcriptions again

[8] Here Graziella refers to B. Somekh, *Participatory Action research and the Learning Organisation: problems and possibilities*, paper presented at BERA Conference, September 1995

and again to come to the next session with the key words of the previous discussions well impressed in memory. Along the way such key words as 'negotiation', 'ownership', but also others in the field of communication, as 'mirroring' or 'paraphrasing', worked as a scaffold for the memory of the groups.

To go back to 'first' and 'second' order research, who stands where? In MOHD both the facilitator and the practitioner have played the role of critical friend to the other and what is more, the content of this aspect of the research has been common. As in Escher's Metamorphoses the changes seem to point to the possibility that the function can change while keeping the role, thus in MOHD the function of the critical friend has been played and has gone in both directions: from the practitioner to the facilitator, from the facilitator to the practitioner. Likewise, reflection has been both on action (disentangling problems and dilemmas as they rose in action) as well on the 'how', researching the facilitatory tools that seem to be more effective in conflictual and problematic situations.
Aware as we are that the fact that the way development takes place differs from context to context and of its being culture-specific, we can say that in our case MOHD:
- provided a space (elsewhere described as a 'pool of reflection', Losito and Pozzo 1997) where problems and dilemmas could be brought forth and unravelled in an atmosphere of trust and authentic exchange
- offered an opportunity to develop a component that is central not only in the profile of the heads of school but also in the profile of the facilitator, a component that is strictly connected to qualitative change
- allowed reflection on action as well as on facilitatory strategies (first- and second-order?)
- in few cases allowed for the validation of knowledge derived from the practice where the strategy turned out to be effective.

Is this not a way of producing theory about what one is researching ? In our specific case both the practitioners and the facilitators learnt from each other mainly in terms of reciprocal monitoring. In a deprived context such as the Italian one maybe the need to pay attention to developmental quality such as active listening and observation and to indirect ways of managing relationships is of greater importance than in other contexts where the culture of observation is engrained in the system. We believe that sharing reflection at this level may prove a good strategy in the creation of a climate conducive to learning in any context, and in getting people to take more responsibility on board, which is, after all, what autonomy is about.

4. Sample of reflection/research

What is the type of knowledge produced in the meetings and how was the knowledge spent in the context of work? Rather than try to give an answer, let us quote a few extracts taken either from the scripts of the meetings or from the notes prepared for the MOHD international meeting held at CEDE last September. These are some samples of the type of reflection that developed in MOHD.
The first example contains the description of a conflict as it was narrated by a head in the Turin group. The head was new to the school, as he had just been appointed director there.

> "A few days before the first day of school, I was in my office, writing something, when the door opened... a teacher came in.... she was visibly upset.... she said, 'I do not intend going on as we did last year'. Soon after, the mother of a pupil came into the office..... she entered with deference, very shy... she looked as if she had done something wrong. I looked at the scene.... I felt puzzled. I told them 'Right, let's sit down'. I had just pronounced these words when four, five teachers entered my office. I immediately thought, 'Poor parent, poor mother' as I saw five, six people against one parent.
> So the teachers started telling me about the problems the woman's son had caused the previous year. He was a restless pupil, overprotected by the family. At this point, the mother interrupted to say that her son

was not considered and valued by his teachers who would always see his negative aspects. I realised the first thing I did was to place myself outside the conflict, completely outside. So I said, 'Sorry, I was not in this school last year. Let's leave the problems you had last year out and let's concentrate on this year'. And then I said, 'Now let's sit down and put me in the picture. Let's sit around this table. You (pointing to the mother) will tell me all that you need to tell me and you (pointing to the teachers) will say all that you have to say'. Everyone had the chance to speak their own mind. Some did this in a very confused way, others in an excited way. What I know is that, at a certain point, the waters became still, maybe because of my telling them that I needed to grasp the essentials of the problem. I think the meeting lasted two - two and a half hours.....

At a given point it became very clear to me that what had to be done was to try and find a common objective, to set up a small project together in order to face the situation. So I suggested we should give ourselves a two months' time of observation of the child, inviting the mother as well as the teachers to ask themselves questions on why the pupil behaved in such a way and then I said, 'We will come back to this table in two months' time and each one of you will bring his own notes'. What I did was in fact opening a table for negotiation to let first plurality of voices to come out ."

The 'opening of the table' referred to in the last lines of the report is of a recursive nature as it sends back to the way problems, dilemmas, incidents and conflicts were dealt with in the group sessions. While each participants would lay a problem or dilemma on the table, frequent reference was made to the importance of the very act of putting problems forth as this would make them available and visible from different perspectives. In the case of dilemmas a lot of attention was also given to their polar formulation, in terms of 'On the one side' 'On the other side', which did not seem to allow for a third way (Watzlawick 1986) by 'splitting', as it were, the horns into a multitude of questions until one is found that seems to point to a way out.

In the case just illustrated, the head stayed out of the conflict. He did not adhere to the reasons of any one party. He structured the situation so that the tensions could be released. He created a physical as well as a metaphorical table where problems could be seen by everybody. Again, to use the practitioner's words, the effect on the different people involved was one of 'distancing them from the problem', 'cooling the atmosphere', 'allowing rielaboration to take place'.

This example, taken out from several others that we could quote from our thick bunch of scripts shows:

- the congruence between the facilitatory practices theorised in the group with those the practitioners themselves tried to implement in their practice
- how reflections in the group were on a number of occasions used to deal with practical problems; that is, they oriented practice.

Was this type of reflection of the first or second order? Was this type of reflection 'on action' or 'in action'?[9] .

On a number of occasions other members of the groups referred to MOHD as saving them from a state of isolation. On head, in particular, who had a difficult relationship with the administrative staff, referred to MOHD as the place where she not only changed the perception of the problem but developed knowledge which she then used in her context of work:

"In the group, I can discover my inner self. It is true that the results are not spectacular and immediate, but - as regards my problem with the administrative staff - what I have changed is the perception of the problem... For me, reflecting on the perception I had of the problem was a punch in the stomach. I started writing. I wrote, wrote, trying to see where the dissonance was. I started to gather data, field notes on pieces of paper to avoid loosing track of them. I learnt what the role of the critical friend was: s/he seems to ask innocent questions or to make apparently harmless statements, but then new hypotheses come up, new horizons

[9] With the second question we want to challenge Schön's use of reflection 'in' and 'on' action, suggesting that perhaps the use of the two types of reflection can be different in different contexts and professions (but we leave this to a future contribution).

> open up.... All this has allowed me to take some distance from what had happened and also to come to terms with my wounded self".

While preparing the materials for the final MOHD conference in Frascati, a third schoolhead wrote:

> "Reflecting together was very easy, on the one hand, and very difficult, on the other. Let's see why. A quiet place, a small room full of books, where it was very difficult to be reached. Each of us felt self-confident enough and aware of our expertise to take the risk of thinking aloud in an unstructured way..... On the whole, an 'unproductive' discourse, not easy to be retold, lacking as it was of data, statements, concepts, problems or well-defined hypotheses. Nevertheless, a discourse characterised by the emotion deriving from a cognitive breakdown, that sort of displacement which, Varela says, leads to the understanding of new meanings, to the unveiling of new aspects of the scene. After all, this circular way of proceeding has proved to be effective as it managed to get hold of some knotty issues. Recurrences in the collective discourse and repetitions have proved to be of relevance... We found that reflection (individual as well as collective) followed paths that often left the main track, took secondary roads, returned back without giving any feeling of displacement or loss".

The schoolhead is reflecting here on the whole path followed: on the ways in which reflection itself developed and on the ways to construct an individual and collective knowledge production process.

Again, if we look at the quotations, is this first- or second-order research? What is clear is that practitioners and facilitators have worked on a ground that is similar and where the reflection on facilitatory strategies is of the same order.
In a way MOHD has worked for both figures as a gym where one goes, keeps the body active as well as develops all the small muscles that together make for the firmness of the whole body, thus getting ready for brisk walks but also for strenuous climbing.

5. The outside researcher/facilitator's responsibilities

At the start of the MOHD project we wrote (Losito-Pozzo, under print):

> "In fact, we found ourselves not only playing different roles, but also carrying out reflection and research at different levels and on different issues, both of 'first' and 'second' order: our roles and our strategies for facilitating practitioners' research, the role of schoolheads in school development and organisational development. At the same time, we tried (and we are still trying) to involve the schoolheads in a reflection upon the process of professional development they are engaged in, upon action research as a strategy for their professional development and on methods and data collection techniques".

In fact, we feel that practitioners' professional and personal development, and thus the possibility to generate change, is not only via the growth of awareness on the part of practitioners themselves with respect to their professional practice, but also via their 'control' capacity with respect to professional development processes in which they play a leading role. That is, via a second-order reflection on action research paths they have taken part in. 'Control' of processes may also contribute to 'control' of knowledge produced and thus to favour practitioners as regards the power relation that exists in the education field between researchers and academics, on one side, and practitioners on the other (Nofke, 1994; Jennings and Graham, 1996).
From the outside researcher/facilitator's standpoint the problem thus becomes how to facilitate this progressive growth of awareness on the part of practitioners.
In the MOHD project we tried to deal with this issue through a series of strategies partly aimed at creating a favourable context for discussion (see the preceding paragraph) and partly at facilitating

reflection for its own sake.
The first group of strategies include:

- Stimulating an open form of negotiation, aiming to bring to light participants' motivations and expectations (practitioners and outside researchers/facilitators), to establish a contract shared and accepted by all participants. All this in the knowledge that negotiation is a process which accompanies the whole action research path, in a constant attempt to make explicit and shared by others things that are normally implicit. In addition, expectations and motivations may change during the process.
- Facilitating the construction of a collective memory and the circulating of materials produced.
- Formulating proposals to define 'tasks' for the group.
- Offering the methodological support required for data collection and analysis (reasoning on the need for and on the limits of each method, offering examples and materials for reflection).

As regards the second group of strategies, we particularly tried to facilitate reflection through:

- A way of handling discussions that would stimulate the explicitation of implicit theories.
- The use of paraphrases to offer a reformulation of what practitioners produced, following a mirroring technique.
- The use of metaphors concerning the schoolheads' role in order to make them express the way they perceived themselves in this role.
- A reformulation, by using dilemmas, of the contrasting views found in collective reflection, in order to offer grounds on which these could be overcome.

In moments where discussion seemed to be lost we tried to reconnect the threads by going over the themes dealt with, offering open interpretations, reconstructing connections between the different positions and different elements for reflection that were put forward by the schoolheads.

The use of these different strategies and the choice of the right moment where to use one strategy or the other was the subject of our first-order reflection. The materials we reflected on were both the data collected and presented by each schoolhead, based on personal experience, and the transcriptions of discussions that had taken place during meetings: i.e. the data collectively produced in the group.
Each one of us acted as a critical friend for the other from a distance: the writing and sharing of accounts, impressions and evaluations were the tools we exchanged to carry out this task.
We did not manage to get an observer to act as 'a third eye' in the triangulation process. In effect, we carried out a sort of 'deferred observation' through the reading of documentation made available to all.
There are several questions that spring to mind on this. To what extent does the absence of an observer restrict the facilitator's research? How far can one insist with practitioners on this procedural aspect by inviting them to make use of an outside observer[10], when we ourselves see the difficulty in achieving this? Can the group (provided it works along the lines we have tried to describe) carry out the same task as that of an outside observer?

[10] The suggestion to use an outside observer often meets with resistance from teachers. The reason is not just the difficulty in exposing oneself to another person's observations, with all the problems relating to self-confidence that this would imply. It is important here to stress that Italian teachers are used to working alone in class without the presence of other colleagues. The only exception is with full-time primary schools.

6. Open questions

We would like to conclude this paper with some observations and questions that we feel might become directions for common reflection in the future.

1. Starting from our experience in the MOHD project, we have maintained that the distinction between first and second order research cannot coincide with a distinction of roles within action research. We are perfectly aware that this fact is largely connected to the type of practitioners (the schoolheads) involved in the project: the expertise of schoolheads involves an activity of 'facilitation', of dealing with relationships inside the school, of creating contexts in which the school can actually become a 'learning organisation'. From this point of view, the skills of schoolheads overlap a great deal with those of facilitators/outside researchers who, inside action research groups, promote strategies aiming at developing learning, personal and professional growth, and change.
Would the kind of reflection that developed in MOHD have been possible with different professional people involved, characterised by other specific skills?

2. Moreover, the schoolheads in the MOHD project schoolheads were people committed to school development, willing to change and interested in research. Without these characteristics, to what extent would schoolheads want to take part in reflection that over the various phases was characterised as second-order research?

3. Another important element to be taken into account is the expertise of facilitators/outside researchers and their institutional position.
Their role as educational researchers, teacher educators and in-service trainers, and their belonging to a university, research centre or professional association are all factors influencing their place and role within action research paths. They are also factors that derive from their training, 'personal record' and 'culture' in general.
To what extent does this diversity influence and/or determine their attitudes and behaviour as regards the reflection/research of the practitioners?
To what extent does it promote/hinder the way they 'perceive' themselves and behave as the practitioners within action research?
Again, on a more general level, to what extent does the 'status' of academic research in the various countries influence this aspect?

4. To claim that facilitators/outside researchers are themselves practitioners would require them to have a research methodology that is in line with that of practitioners (teachers, schoolheads and others) with whom they work. To what extent is this congruence actually present among action researchers today?

5. A final note. In this paper we have used a series of terms such as 'facilitator/outside researcher', 'first and second order research' and 'practitioner' not in a univocal way.
In particular, we have used the terms 'reflection' and 'research' almost in a free variation. Is this legitimate? As a matter of fact our research has not developed along the lines of spiral, as shown in Elliott (Elliott 1991), where research includes action as an important step, but along a path where reflection on action has been the starting point and where, on some occasions, the knowledge derived from the reflection had an effect on action.
This use of the above mentioned terms is certainly linked to our personal experience, to our conceptualisation capacity and to our culture (and perhaps to our very limits).
Could there be a more general need for greater clarity or rethinking on the use of these terms in action research?

Could it be that these terms and their attributed meanings are not univocal but are instead context and culture dependent?

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WHO REFLECT	ABOUT WHAT	OVERLAPPING AREAS
Heads of schools	• school management • relationships inside the school • relationships between the school and the 'outside' (parents, local school authorities, territory...) • schools as learning organisations • their own A-R experience	• schools as learning organisations • facilitation strategies
Facilitators/outside researchers	• how to develop schoolheads' reflection and reflection capacities • schools as learning organisations • AR as a: ■ strategy for self and professional development ■ strategy for change ■ research methodology	• AR as: a strategy for personal and professional development a strategy for change